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Thursday, March 26, 2015

UCL Vice-Provost comments on the Independent Review of the Implementation of the RCUK Open Access policy

Guest Post by Professor David Price, Vice-Provost (Research), University College London

David Price

Research Councils UK (RCUK) has today released the Report of an independent review body on the implementation of its Open Access policy.

It is not a review of Open Access policies and their implementation in the UK. The Report is quite clear about this – it is a review of the impacts of the implementation of the RCUK Policy on Open Access for its funded research outputs. This is a review which is being undertaken at an early stage in the history of that OA policy. As such, there is much that is good and helpful about the Report's findings and I will touch on some of these points below.

Overall, however, the Report is a missed opportunity to look at the deeper implications of the move to Open Access in the UK. There are broader issues, in many of which RCUK is a leader, which would have benefited from a more confident treatment by the panel. There is still a great deal of work to do!

The Report looks in some detail at the question of embargoes. While the short embargoes of 6 and 12 months have been taken up by the research community, there is still unhappiness. As the Report says, some of this is due to poor communication of the policy and resulting confusion in the academic community. Another aspect of it, however, is a genuine concern among some communities, for example History scholars, that short embargo periods are harmful to academic freedom to choose where to publish. RCUK needs to look at the issue of embargo periods again.

The Report also highlights a number of problems with the RCUK recommendation of a CC-BY licence for research outputs. If this *is* the RCUK position, then compliance with the policy would require academics to use this licence. In its review of policy implementation, the Report shows that this has not always been the case. The Report also, quite rightly, highlights the unhappiness of the Arts and Humanities community in the requirement for a CC-BY licence. From the evidence presented, it looks as though this community feels they are being made to dance to a biomedical and scientific tune, where CC-BY is more acceptable. The Report is right to highlight the need for further investigation.

The Report has further nuggets of wisdom. It highlights the administrative costs for universities of implementing the RCUK Open Access policy, building on the London Higher Report supported by SPARC Europe. It also suggests that university and publisher systems should be developed to accommodate ORCID (for author IDs) and FundRef (for funder information), which will help monitor implementation of the policy in future years.

Table 7 presents some really interesting data on the mean costs of Article Processing Charges (APCs).

	OA journals published by non-subscription publishers	Full OA journals published by subscription publishers	Hybrid journals published by subscription publishers

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5-year mean (2010-14)	£1,136	£1,164	£1,849

Why are the costs in the final column for Hybrids so much bigger than the rest? It was beyond the remit of the review to investigate this in detail, but this question does need further study. RCUK derives its money from public funds and this is a question which the taxpayer would certainly have a right to understand in more detail.

While the Report contains much that is useful and thought-provoking, there are some big gaps that it should have covered. The Report consciously limits itself to the implementation of the RCUK policy, and does not look at the wider UK Open Access scene in detail. This is a mistake because the RCUK position would be more intelligible if such a wider comparison had taken place. The Report says that the RCUK policy position is broadly complementary to other UK OA policies. Any misunderstandings on this front may be due, it says, to poor communication of the policies. Really? Are there many universities who believe this? The new HEFCE policy for REF 2020 seems to me to be quite different from the RCUK policy, and it is the REF policy that is capturing university attention at the moment. It is only the REF policy which is insisting on 'deposit on acceptance'. And it is the RCUK policy which encourages Gold OA publications and requires the use of a CC-BY licence. The REF policy is neutral, for example, as to the colour (Gold or Green) of the OA output. To say that the RCUK and REF policies are complementary defies logic. The RCUK Review panel needs to think this one through again.

The Report highlights the shortcomings of universities in gathering data for the review. It is right to do so. There needs to be more accurate reporting next time. In that respect, I would have expected the Review panel to draw up a template for reporting, addressing the issues it identified as weaknesses in the first set of reports. The Report recommends that a template be constructed, but why (when this is such an important issue) did it not draw up this template itself? Not good practice.

Finally, the Report cautiously advocates that RCUK look at the level of funding it gives to fund OA dissemination in future years. A welcome recommendation, but rather weak. Wellcome funds all OA outputs that emanate from its funded research. Why did the RCUK review not make a similar recommendation? As things stand, once RCUK funds are exhausted, universities either have to find monies for APCs themselves or advise the authors to publish their outputs as Green outputs. This is unsatisfactory and will lead to a fragmented publication framework for RCUK research which is in no-one's interests.

To conclude: the independent Review panel which has produced the review of the implementation of the RCUK Open Access policy has only half done its job. It has produced a detailed analysis about implementation, which is useful. But, in walking away from broader policy issues, it leaves many questions unanswered which should have been tackled. Will future reviews take these issues forward? They should.

Posted by Richard Poynder at 09:13

1 comment:

pelaprat said...

Concerning the differences in the costs of APCs between hybrid journals and full OA journals, be they published by a "non- sub publisher" or a "sub publisher": as in most of the reports or communications on that topic,the actual difference in "publication cost" is once more largely underestimated here. Indeed, nobody seems to be aware that, when speaking about full OA journal, the "APC" gives the final cost, whereas, for "OA options" in hybrids, the "APC" always adds to the "normal publication costs", which can variy between $0 and almost $ 3,000. If we estimate the mean value of "normal publication cost" to around $700 (our internal study on biomedical journals), it thus gives a mean total of around £1,849(APC) + $ 500 "normal" = £ 2350. ie more than twice that of a "full OA journal", whatever the kind of publisher. In the case of some hallucinatingly high "normal publication cost" journals, like EMBO journal (around 2,700 euros for 10 pages), adding APCs will lead to a total of almost 7,000 euros....I really suggest that such an "additivity" of the APCs and "normal publication costs" in hybrid journals be largely advertised... and reinforces the question "why such a difference?". Kind regards. Didier Pélaprat (research Director, France)

March 26, 2015 12:08 pm

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(A print version of this eBook is available here) Earlier this year I was invited to discuss with Georgia Institute of Technology libraria...

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***Update: On August 26th 2016, the US government (Federal Trade Commission) announced that it has charged OMICS with making false claims, ...

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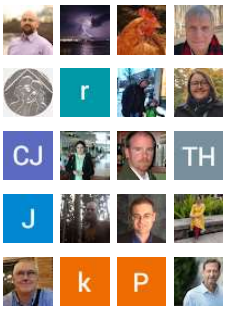

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